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REV STUART LOVE, CLINCARTHILL PARISH CHURCH

What does Biblical Community look like in Clincarthill Parish Church?

Introduction

As a minister in his first charge, it has been a useful exercise to reflect on what biblical community looks like in Clincarthill Parish Church. Before exploring how Clincarthill Church expresses biblical community, we first must look back on the history of this congregation, as well as take note of the context of our community and parish.

1. A Bit of History...

Clincarthill Parish Church came into being in 2010. It is the result of a union between Mount Florida and Battlefield East Parish Churches. Union between congregations is a method used to manage *numerical* decline in the Church of Scotland. This can be traumatic for any congregation. Examples could be given which show how poorly this process can be managed and received *in communities*.

In the case of Clincarthill, the union made logical sense. It was possible to stand at the door of Battlefield East Church building and hold a conversation with someone standing at the door of the Mount Florida Church building; albeit, using somewhat raised voices.

The parish population is nearly 6000 and the perimeter walked in about half an hour. As only a small percentage of the parish attended the two churches, it made sense to combine the two congregations (which were formed as a result of previous splits and reunions).

From the point of union, the focus of the congregation was internal: not so much out of choice, but out of necessity. It was the task of

my immediate predecessor, and the first minister of the united charge, to bring these two congregations together. Additionally, having completed sales of the vacated church building and manse, the money raised was then employed to upgrade the remaining building, making it fit for purpose for the 21st century. These tasks necessitated an internal focus for the congregation's first 6 years of existence.

I was called, ordained and inducted as minister of the newly-formed congregation in October 2016. As I have reflected on this past of my congregation, and sought to discern how God is calling them to move forward for Him, I have found my sense of call to this church crystallise into the following: I am to help turn their focus from being inward to outward; from self to parish/community; essentially, from maintenance to mission.

2. To Whom Are We to Be Community?

The Clincarthill Parish Church logo carries this tagline, 'A Church for the Community'. The idea and importance of community are, therefore, highlighted in the very graphic that we use to 'advertise' ourselves. As such, it is vital that we follow through with what we say on 'our tin'. What we endeavour to do is be a biblical community at the heart of and there to serve our geographic community.

In order to be biblical community which serves our geographic community, we first need to ask and understand: to whom are we to be community?

When I first came to Clincarthill, the perception was that our parish was made up of the retired/elderly, and immigrants. While this perception may sound judgemental or prejudiced, it is based on observed experience: if you take time during the day to walk the streets of our parish and observe, those are the two *predominant* people groups you will see.

However, when we examined our Statistics for Mission, produced by the Church of Scotland (based upon the 2011 census) we found:

- 80% of our parish is of a white/Scottish background
- 36% are aged between 25 and 44; 26% are aged between 45 and 64
Meaning 62% are of typical working age
- 47% are in full time employment, 10% employed part-time, and 5% unemployed

The total correlates with the working age figures

To this, we can add some anecdotal evidence:

The old tenement housing in the Mount Florida area of the parish has been well kept. A number of these beautiful old buildings have had their

interior renovated to bring them up to modern standards. The joke in the local area is that, 'it's as nice as the West End, but you're paying South Side prices' (a joke/reality those who live in Glasgow might understand!).

There are reliable and cheap transport links to the surrounding areas (e.g. East Kilbride) but especially into the city centre.

These factors make our parish/community a desirable place to live, particularly by those looking for their first home, and who work in the city. This is evident if you visit Mount Florida station between 6am and 9am, or 4pm and 7pm, as you can witness the mass of commuters going to/returning home from the city centre!

In conclusion we can say that a significant number of our parish eat and sleep in the local area, but spend a substantial amount of their time elsewhere in the city working and (likely) socialising.

Which, of course, leaves Clincarthill Church facing a challenging question: how do we embody and express biblical community to those who spend most of their time outside the geographic community we serve?

3. How Do We Already Embody A Biblical Community?

This is a complex question, and neither I, nor anyone else in the congregation has yet arrived at the definitive answer as to how we might engage or include such people in our biblical community.

That does not mean we aren't trying. I can share with you how I believe we are currently embodying biblical community, as well as share some thoughts on how I believe we need to develop this over the coming months and years.

One thing we noticed about our community is the lack of space for groups to gather. Our church building has a larger footprint than the one which was sold (to another Christian group, which was the cause of much joy and relief to the previous congregation!). There is a local primary school, but the lack of space in their own premises requires them to come to us for large school assemblies.

Accordingly, we have made our building open and available to community groups who need space. This brings many benefits: it doesn't require a great investment of resources from us, as groups are already established, with leaders to run it and clientele to come. It raises the profile of the church (well, at least the building) and hopefully sends a message that people from the community are welcome.

We also created groups meant to extend the hand of friendship, in the name of Christ. We run a Coffee Morning and a Seniors Friday Dinners: opportunities for people to gather for a time of socialising around a cuppa or a meal. Congregation members are leaders in our Brownie and Boys'

Brigade Company, for young women and men. We run an event called 'Feed the Fans', where we open our building and provide refreshments and (most importantly) toilets to those fans coming to events at nearby Hampden Park – Scotland's national football stadium.

All of this, I would class as 'Acts of Loving Kindness'. We are endeavouring to show and reflect the love of God in these events and send the message out into the community that people are welcome in our place. I believe these events are an important part of our witness, but one thing gives me pause for thought: these could be termed 'evangelism-light' events. While we hope our actions speak of God's love, conversations about the Gospel are few and far between. Very rarely (if at all) does someone from these events, who is not already involved in our (or another) Christian fellowship, express interest in finding out more about God, Christ, or the church's beliefs.

4. How Do We Further Embody Biblical Fellowship?

There are several ways in which Clincarthill could better embody what it means to be a biblical community; and I imagine there always will be. As God's people, our trajectory is to move ever closer to the likeness of Christ, and we acknowledge we are always going to be 'works in progress' this side of the new creation.

There are two areas which I have identified as being of importance, to help us move forward for God.

First: we need to prioritise evangelism and discipleship and create more opportunities for both. As I have said, we are good at the 'acts of love', 'evangelism-light' approach, but this is insufficient. After all, Jesus did call us to make disciples, teaching all that He commanded.

We are in the process of addressing this. Clincarthill Church has used the Alpha course in the past, and our intention is to use this again. One helpful suggestion of our Mission and Outreach team was to identify locations in the parish where we could meet apart from the church building: this could make attending an event less threatening for a non-Christian.

We are also in the early stages of considering how we can develop a holistic approach to our parish mission: focussing on body, mind and spirit. Fitness and health are currently at the fore in peoples' minds, with the spirit being the often-neglected part of that health-trinity. We hope that by taking a holistic approach, and showing we take physical and mental health seriously, we might encourage people to explore their spiritual health more deeply, and perhaps allow us to introduce them to Jesus Christ.

Second: we must address the attitude of 'going to church' versus 'being the church'. This is a hang-over from previous generations: even when

I was growing up, my family would talk about ‘going to church’ on a Sunday.

Going to church is something you do, at a specific time each week. Being the church is something you are, which impacts all aspects of your life. I believe encouraging and instilling this attitude in those who are part of Clincarthill Church is vital if we are going to be useful to God in the building of His kingdom in our part of the city. How is this done? Well... that is a good question!

Conclusion, and Final Observations

Some observations to conclude:

I am encouraged by the willingness and enthusiasm of most of the congregation, who are willing to move as God calls. I find my calling to these people also to be a help, as I have a real sense the Lord brought us together and we have met in the right place at the right time.

I am also encouraged by what I perceive God to be doing hidden from view. Several in the congregation have been blessed with a sense that God’s Spirit is on the move. We do not know what He is doing, but we know He is working.

We have also been blessed in the past two and a half years with two substantial legacies left to the church: both six-figure sums of money. We look at this and trust that God would not grant us such provision if He did not have a plan for us.

What might that be? We do not know, but we carry on, trusting that when things are ready, God will reveal it.

We take heart from Paul’s writing that the cross of Jesus Christ was considered foolishness by the Greeks. To the world’s ears, it may sound foolish to trust in these unseen things of God; but for us in Clincarthill Church, we declare that, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 5:25 NIVUK).

REV TIM SINCLAIR, PARTICK TRINITY CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

I have been the minister of Partick Trinity Church of Scotland since February 2018. I am attempting to describe a living community, with a past as well as a present, that I have recently joined and has not been shaped or steered to any great extent by my ministry.

Partick Trinity, as part of the Church of Scotland, is responsible for a discrete geographical area; specifically, the parish covers the north-eastern corner of Partick including a slice of the University of Glasgow’s campus. Partick was, until recently, one of the less affluent districts

within the inner West End of Glasgow. To the east of our parish is the Byres Road corridor and the University of Glasgow, to the north and west the relatively prosperous areas of Dowanhill and Hyndland. Partick is, however, becoming increasingly gentrified. Students and young professionals, attracted by the University and a vibrant arts scene, contribute to a diverse and dynamic population. This young and transitory population have moved in but have not yet squeezed out the 'indigenous' people of Partick; a largely working-class population with a strong connection to the Highlands and Islands.

At the 2016 SETS conference, we explored the influence of consumerism on the church. Glasgow's inner West End, including Partick, is the church-shoppers equivalent of Buchanan Street – Glasgow's main shopping street; there is something to scratch every ecclesial itch. One challenge, amid this febrile market-place atmosphere, is the tendency for churches to be fiercely independent and to view neighbours as competitors and with suspicion. Partick and the wider West End has become something of a hot-house for church plants. The list of new churches gathering within half a mile of our church is always growing. Mirroring the draw of the wider West End cultural experience, many of these churches are drawing Christians from all over Glasgow and beyond. This is not necessarily helpful in Partick and one can only imagine that it is detrimental elsewhere. Several churches from mainline denominations have closed. Partick Trinity is itself the result of the union of a 'trinity' of Partick churches and many neighbouring churches from the older denominations are struggling, if not in crisis.

Although our congregation is also part of a mainline denomination, it has thus far avoided the inertia that has stymied so many of our neighbours. The congregation has managed to straddle the divide between what we might call the 'old Partick' and the 'new' – those drawn by work, study, and the attractions of West End living.

There are various metaphors readily at hand to describe any church. There are the biblical images: a body, a temple, a flock, an exilic enclave, to name but a few. There are also modern equivalents: a team, a movement, a disciple making culture and so on. The term that finds immediate traction in our context is 'family'. I have heard many people testify, with real affection, about individuals in the church who have functioned as surrogate aunts and uncles, grannies and grandpas, or brothers and sisters. Beneath these labels are relationships marked by care, love, humour, and hospitality.

This picture of a church-as-family is easily romanticised and perhaps susceptible to sentimentality. I would suggest that at Partick Trinity it is grounded in concrete action and in a certain posture; there is a lean-

ing in towards one another. I suspect that a dispassionate anthropologist observing our Sunday congregation might well notice certain familial traits: different generations committed to one another, a sharing together in celebrations and sadness, a willingness to stick it out together despite differences in personalities and preferences.

It would be a mistake (albeit a perfectly understandable one) to imagine that I am using family as a collective noun for nice (or at least well-meaning) Christians or nice families of Christians, being nice to one another; where the word family comes with its most positive connotations of happy, secure and settled relationships. In an increasingly affluent community, we might readily expect to encounter capable people with well-ordered lives, that exhibit the wholeness and peace the Bible calls *shalom*.

But for a great many people in our church, the experience of 'church-as-family' is not an echo or happy analogy of their experience of family outwith the church. The family that is found at church is not an attempt to replicate what is found at home.

Indeed, for many of our folk their family at home (by which I mean nuclear/extended family) is incomplete or distorted; robbed of its happiness, security or illusion of permanence, by grief, family breakdown, or crises of physical and/or mental health. Therefore, for a number of our folk, it is actually in church where they come closest to experiencing the family in all its fullness: love, security, stability – *shalom*. At home they see only an echo or a sad parody of family, little that speaks of God's willing for us not to be alone.

Thinking theologically, the great discovery is this: the family into which I am adopted as Christian, which finds a visible and localised expression in the congregation of Partick Trinity, has a wholeness that both encompasses and overcomes the incompleteness of its constituent parts.

Our church might be blessed by the addition of a young, happily married Christian couple, with education and promising careers, with faith and gifts and willingness to use them. At the same time I know from experience that our church-as-family has been blessed by divorcees, widows, orphans, and those bruised by past experiences of church.

For our church-as-family has been blessed by those suffering with anxiety disorders, depression and multiple bereavements, and the exhausted parents of exhausting kids. The closer I look the more the expressions of injury and incompleteness multiply. There is an elderly person who has been widowed longer than I have been alive, a young person who everyone says has a bright future but whose present experience is rootless, restless, and lonely, a single parent who has little freedom, and no energy.

There is a faithful woman whose husband has no faith. But wonderfully each has been called by Christ into a family where they find themselves blessed and the means of blessing to one another.

Shalom is not the entry requirement for the church. But shalom is the expression of God in action as he adopts us into one family. If our locality inculcates individualism, it is by God's grace and for his glory that we are brought into a family, 'bearing with one another in love' (Eph. 4:2).

REV JANE HOWITT, ST ROLLOX CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

In seeking to aim for a greater understanding of St Rollox and what is happening there, we can consider two aspects of the church, drawing from Mark Stirling's address at the SETS conference: its base and build.

The Church Base

The base for the church is a transformation and regeneration area. Sighthill, in the north east of Glasgow's city centre, used to have tens of thousands of residents in a very small locality. In recent years the population has decreased dramatically. Now there are only about two thousands residents. This is because the whole area has been regenerated. Housing has been demolished; people have been dispersed out of the community and housed elsewhere in Glasgow. This was also the experience of the congregation, many of whom were dispersed from Sighthill and housed elsewhere in Glasgow.

Sighthill was an area of very high multiple deprivation. Now because of the reduction in population, those problems are less, but there are still many hardships and parts of Sighthill remain in the top decile of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. There is still a remnant of the former issues within a reduced population. Perhaps that makes the issues more concentrated, or more diluted, depending on your view of things.

The whole area is changing. Today the community is growing. There are another 850 homes to be built by 2025 and the population is expected to grow by four-fold in years ahead. As church develops vision for ministry, it does so in a void, a vacuum, as we don't know what the area will be like in a few years. This is a tremendous challenge, but also a great opportunity.

Part of the regeneration of the area meant that the old church building was subject to a compulsory purchase order. The new church building has recently been completed and is slightly more central to the housing scheme than before. It is in a really good, strategic position. And the church has been built before much of the housing that is planned for the

area and community is built. So the church can welcome people into the area when they arrive.

One of the characteristics of the parish is there is a higher than average ethnic population. There is a high ethnic mix. Many immigrants were housed in the area following 2000 when many asylum seekers and refugees were received into the UK. At that time many immigrants were located through London to three cities in the UK including Glasgow. From the year 2000 therefore we have been welcoming people into the community from all parts of the world. Within Sighthill, 56% inhabitants are non-white and non-Scots. In the congregation, 80% of members have origins from outside of Scotland.

This gives again many challenges and many opportunities.

As we are taught in Isaiah 2, the community of the church is indeed for all-nations. This is one of the theological reflections that drives our ministry, is that we are a house of prayer for all nations.

There is a challenge of working cross-culturally in the middle of Glasgow. It is a great challenge. Many different countries, backgrounds and denominations are represented at St Rollox. It is a very interesting set of circumstances to be asked to lead in. Some of our members from overseas, have come from very different societal traditions and styles of ministry. For example, older Africans were taught – often by rote – clearly boundary ways of thinking, acting and doing in their home lands. Their past experience is very different from what they would find in Scotland, in society and church, regardless of denomination. Some undoing of the base is therefore required, and relaying of the base, that enables us to allow to build stronger community and a building that has that space for everyone, for all the nations to be able to live together and worship together and be a family together. Many of our members don't have family in Scotland, so the church as a family is a hugely significant part of life, ministry and social structure. This aspect of church life can't be overemphasised.

When we learn to support one another in these ways, we help people to overcome a lot of pain that people are feeling because of dislocation from home and families. The church is able to be a huge help.

Many different countries, backgrounds and denominations are represented at St Rollox. It is a very interesting set of circumstances to be asked to lead in. Developing an understanding of how church can be church in such a place is something that we are constantly working on.

The congregation faces daily hardship. Many members have come through the asylum process. There are refugees, asylum seekers and 'desitute asylum seekers' – those for whom all government support has been withdrawn.

With these circumstances, many who are able to work end up in poorly paid work. A large number in the congregation work nightshifts. That makes building community even within the church enormously challenging. People cannot come to evening meetings or midweek meetings. Employees experience constant changes in shifts and night-shifts because many of them are seen as being at the bottom of the pile in society. This makes building community through the week and evenings virtually impossible. So most of what we do together is on a Sunday. Most will come on Sunday, but are maybe not able to come on another day, as they can't afford it.

Most in the congregation travel by public transport; they don't have means to have a car. One man was moved to Clydebank, to the west of Glasgow, he takes two buses to St Rollox. Though it is only a distance of ten miles, it takes 2.5 hours by bus. Why does he come? In very broken English, he said, 'Here I feel a peace'. There's something that transcends language when church is living as community. It finds this unity in Christ who transcends barriers. We see this in St Rollox and it is a huge privilege to be there.

That's the base. How then do we then build?

The Church Build

One of the ways we build is into our community and into the community of asylum seekers and refugees who come to us from a vast swathe of Glasgow. There are various activities in which this works. Examples are the sewing and ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) classes, and the charity shop run by the church.¹

Those who may have been enemies in their homelands have learned at St Rollox to support one another. I think it is amazing how God places people in the right place to do a work that is more than what we could have imagined or expected in their lives.

A biblical text that often comes to my mind in ministry at St Rollox, is that Jesus come to give life in all its fullness (John 10:10). How do we do this? We take a holistic approach. Admittedly, much of what we do in the community is social on the surface. Yet Christ is there. How do we help people see him in that? One way that I have found effective is running a class called 'faith stories'. I gather with Muslim women to read a gospel story where someone meets Jesus. I discuss faith in Jesus. A conversation develops about who Jesus is, and who God reveals his Son to be in Scripture.

¹ 'Speak Out: Building Global Friendships illustrated film', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke-Qk3jQnbg>>. Accessed 28th September 2019.

Some in the congregation will speak about 'what happened in the war'. Here they are talking about the war that was taking place in their home country when they fled. Or 'when I was raped,' because that was what some experienced in their home countries. So we have run a trauma healing course, which is produced by the Scottish Bible Society. This course is very helpful, biblically based and enables men and women to speak about their experiences and see it in the context of life in all its fullness that Jesus offers through his healing power.

One of the aspects of building is leadership. We all face this in our church situations. One of the things we have worked hard to develop is a leadership that reflects the ethnic diversity of the church. That is a hard thing to do. Learning to let go and to live with things being done in a different way is more challenging than we like to admit. We need to acknowledge the skills and gifts that others bring and build capacity so that people can know how to use those gifts.

Jeremiah 1 has been a very helpful passage to me for my call to ministry. When Jeremiah recognised he was not capable to do work of his call, God's answer was to say, 'I am with you' (Jer. 1:6), not 'It's ok, you'll be able to do it'. I realise it isn't that I need to be able to do the work, but God will do it, and because God is with me and working through me, he will accomplish far more than I can do. Failure is a necessary part of the church work. We create space to fail, yes, but what we have in mind is to fail in the way that Peter failed, whereby afterwards there is restoration, re-equipping and then hopefully the goods being delivered. It is a long process! Hopefully when people move in, they find the base is there, they will find a place of welcome and an entry point for fullness of life as Jesus promises us.